



Back to Oakville urges drilling halt after close call

## Oakville urges drilling halt after close call

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After averting a potential disaster, Oakville wants the Ontario government to immediately stop unregulated drilling for geothermal energy installations until rules are written to ensure public safety.

"We consider this to be an explosive situation," Mayor Rob Burton said, following an incident last month in which a contractor drilling a borehole for a vertical geothermal heating system struck significant volumes of pressurized natural gas hundreds of feet deep.

Burton said Thursday he has written letters to Premier Dalton McGuinty and four other ministers urging a moratorium on deep well and borehole drilling in urban areas.

The contractor, working in a heavily populated neighbourhood, had no petroleum-gas monitoring equipment, according to Burton.

"The incident could have caused extensive property damage, personal injury or even loss of life," he said.

A few days later, the local gas utility and town fire department received an emergency call from the owner of a home about 100 metres from the drilling site who heard a bubbling noise from a sump pump hole.

High levels of natural gas (which is odourless in its naturally occurring state) were found inside and outside the home, and officials took steps to ensure proper ventilation and natural gas monitoring.

"Those workers and other people around there were very lucky and should be buying lottery tickets," Burton said.

Kate Jordan, a spokeswoman for the Environment Ministry, said the government is reviewing the mayor's request.

Ministry officials have visited the site to ensure the contractor permanently caps the well so no further gas leaks into the environment.

Oakville Fire Chief Lee Grant said fellow leaders in his provincial association are also calling on the province to develop regulations for borehole drilling and installation of geothermal energy systems.

"Allowing unregulated drilling in populated areas is a potential recipe for disaster," Grant noted.

In the letter, the mayor and town council expressed concerns with the province's Green Energy Act of 2009, because there is no requirement for a driller to be a licensed well contractor using proper technicians.

Under the act, a drilling company doesn't need a permit to install a ground-source energy system; to consult with professional geoscientists and engineers; or have an emergency contingency plan or safety equipment on site.

The act does not allow municipalities to pass bylaws that would prevent or restrict installation of ground-source energy systems.

Burton said it appears there are deep pockets of natural gas in Oakville and other areas of southern Ontario, with links to petroleum deposits in the Ohio Valley.

Natural resources officials, he added, confirmed that it's likely that deep well drilling in Oakville will result in contact with pockets of natural gas.



Oakville Mayor Rob Burton is calling on the province to call a moratorium on deep drilling for geothermal energy installations until it puts together safety regulations, after a close call Calder St. in Oakville last month.

Colin McConnell/Toronto Star